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Haunting Messages: Online Videos and Public Belief in Paranormal Phenomena

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Abstract

Despite broad skepticism within the scientific community regarding paranormal phenomena such as ghosts and unidentified flying objects (UFOs), many members of the public believe in these phenomena. Previous studies have argued that viewing paranormal-themed television—including documentary, reality, and news programming—can cultivate such beliefs. In addition, recent research suggests that the online video-sharing platform YouTube may serve as an important source of messages about fringe phenomena. With that in mind, this study builds on theoretical accounts of genre-specific cultivation and social media affordances to examine how YouTube videos present paranormal topics and whether YouTube use predicts belief in the paranormal. A content analysis of 50 highly viewed YouTube videos about paranormal topics (25 about hauntings and 25 about UFOs) showed that a large majority of these videos featured paranormal claims and that a majority included purported footage of paranormal phenomena. Scientific sources appeared in only a quarter of UFO videos and almost no haunting videos, while government sources appeared in most UFO videos, but few haunting videos. An analysis of data from a survey of the U.S. public (n = 1,035), in turn, found that paranormal documentary or reality television viewing, paranormal news use, and YouTube use predicted belief in hauntings, controlling for a range of other media use variables and background factors. These results highlight the potential for video-sharing platforms such as YouTube to reinforce paranormal beliefs among the public.

Keywords: online videos, YouTube, public beliefs, cultivation, paranormal

The scientific community has long taken a skeptical stance toward paranormal or fringe phenomena such as hauntings and unidentified flying objects (UFOs), with mainstream scientists generally concluding that claims about the existence of these phenomena lack a basis in scientific evidence.[1,2] Furthermore, researchers have argued that belief in paranormal phenomena reflects a lack of scientific understanding and may foster susceptibility to misinformation.[3,4] At the same time, belief in paranormal phenomena such as ghosts and UFOs is common among many populations, including the U.S. public.[5–10] For example, a 2023 Ipsos survey found that 39% of the U.S. public believed in ghosts and 42% believed in UFOs.[11]

Numerous studies have examined the psychological[12–14] and sociological[15–17] factors associated with such beliefs. In addition, a smaller body of research has examined how media use predicts paranormal beliefs. In particular, studies drawing on cultivation theory—which posits that audience members' perceptions of reality can reflect dominant portrayals in the media system, particularly television—have argued that audience members rely on prominent, and thus cognitively accessible, media depictions in forming such beliefs.[18–21] Building on the premise that television tends to portray paranormal phenomena "as if they actually occur," studies using correlational analyses of survey data have found that heavy viewers are especially likely to hold paranormal beliefs.[22] Consistent with accounts of *genre-specific* cultivation, the relationship between watching and believing is clearer for paranormal documentary and reality television viewing than for overall television viewing or science fiction viewing—a pattern that may reflect the former genre's use of documentary stylings, purported footage of paranormal phenomena, and "trappings of science" such as technology and jargon to enhance its credibility.[23–28]

In terms of psychological mechanisms that may underlie links between media use and paranormal beliefs, experimental evidence indicates that exposure to different *claims* can influence such beliefs: For example, news stories affirming paranormal phenomena such as ghosts, UFOs, and ESP can

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increase belief in them, whereas stories debunking or mocking such phenomena can reduce belief.[20,23,29–31] Experimental studies have also found that *source credibility* can shape the impact of paranormal messages: Specifically, affirmation or rebuttal from a scientific source can enhance the impact of media messages in bolstering or undermining paranormal beliefs.[32,33] In addition, research has suggested that *perceptually realistic* imagery and audio in television and film can produce a "naturalizing effect," and thereby shape audience members' beliefs, including paranormal beliefs.[28,34,35]

Less research to date has examined how the use of online video platforms such as YouTube is related to paranormal beliefs. Yet these platforms are widely popular, with one 2021 survey finding that 81% of the U.S. public had used YouTube.[36] Furthermore, paranormal content is both common and popular on YouTube.[28,37] For example, a video of an allegedly haunted police training facility posted by KHON2 News had received more than 10 million views as of March 2023. Similarly, two videos about purported UFOs—one from *60 Minutes* and the other from 8 News Now Las Vegas—had received more than 10 million views as of March 2023.

If television depictions of paranormal phenomena can reinforce belief in these phenomena, as cultivation theory suggests, then YouTube depictions may do the same. Although cultivation research has focused on television as the dominant medium, platforms such as YouTube now occupy prominent roles in the media system. Providing precedent for this hypothesis, studies have found that overall YouTube use and exposure to specific YouTube videos can influence beliefs about both mainstream science and fringe topics such as flat Earth or COVID-19 conspiracy theories.[38–41] Of particular relevance here, one recent study found a positive relationship between YouTube use and belief in UFOs.[28] Building on the argument that each social media platform possesses its own set of *affordances*[42]—that is, "things that it allows and makes easy versus things that are not possible or difficult"[43]—the study's authors posited that the association between YouTube use and belief might reflect the platform's affordances for sharing purported footage of UFOs.[28] More broadly, YouTube provides a platform for sharing traditional media content, while also allowing users to co-construct and curate the site.

This study advances previous research in two ways. First, it analyzes YouTube videos about two fringe topics—hauntings and UFOs—for which there is widespread public belief; considerable media attention, including on YouTube; and relatively little political polarization compared to fringe theories about topics such as vaccines and climate change.[41,44] Specifically, the study examines the presence of three elements that previous research suggests may shape paranormal beliefs: Paranormal claims, purported footage of paranormal phenomena, and scientific sources. It also examines the presence of government sources, given that many members of the public trust scientific information from such sources.[45,46] The study then uses original survey data to analyze how different forms of media consumption predict belief in hauntings. In doing so, it tests whether the finding of an association between YouTube use and belief in UFOs extends to another paranormal domain.

Analyzing Paranormal YouTube Videos

To examine paranormal claims, purported footage, and sources in YouTube videos about hauntings and UFOs, the study drew on a content analysis of 50 highly viewed videos.

Methods

The researchers obtained the sample by searching YouTube for videos posted in the past five years as of March 2023 (see Supplementary Data S1 for details). The 25 most-viewed videos about each topic were chosen (see Table 1). Two-thirds of the UFO videos and half of the ghost videos came from channels affiliated with traditional media organizations.

The unit of analysis was the video. A *paranormal claim* was defined as any statement that a phenomenon was or may have been caused, created, or controlled by an extraterrestrial intelligence; a supernatural, spiritual, or demonic force; or a creature not recognized by mainstream science. *Purported footage* of a paranormal phenomenon included original or archival video and/or audio footage. A video was coded as including a *scientific source* if it cited or included an interview of a source identified by voice or text as being a scientist (e.g., professors, university-affiliated researchers, and scientific organizations). A video was coded as including a *government source* if it cited or included an interview of a source identified as being affiliated with

Table 1. Sample of YouTube Videos for Content Analysis

	Ghosts	*UFOs*
Search terms	Haunting ($n = 5$) Paranormal ($n = 5$) Poltergeist ($n = 4$) Haunted House ($n = 3$) Paranormal investigator ($n = 3$) EVP ($n = 2$) Ghost ($n = 2$) Ghost hunter ($n = 1$)	UFO ($n = 23$) Unidentified flying object ($n = 2$)
% from channels affiliated with traditional print/TV media organizations	52%	68%
Median number of views	1,284,399	4,177,806.
N	25	25

Note. Searches for "UAP" and "unidentified aerial phenomena" did not generate additional unique top-viewed videos.
EVP, electronic voice phenomena; UFOs, unidentified flying objects.

a government (e.g., public officials or agencies, military personnel, and law enforcement officers).

Two trained undergraduates coded each video. Tests of intercoder reliability indicated that agreement between coders ranged from adequate to good (see Table 2 for coefficients and examples).[47] A third coder resolved all disagreements between the first and second coders.

Results

Paranormal claims appeared in an overwhelming majority (94%) of the videos in the sample. Every video about hauntings included such a claim, as did 88% of UFO videos. The prevalence of paranormal claims did not differ significantly across topics.

A majority of the videos in the sample (64%) included purported footage of paranormal phenomena. The prevalence of purported footage did not differ significantly across videos about hauntings (72%) and UFOs (56%).

Few videos included scientific sources (16%), whereas government sources were more common (42%). Compared to videos about hauntings, UFO videos were more likely to include scientific sources [4% versus 28%; χ^2 (1,50) = 5.36, $p < 0.05$] and government sources (8% versus 76%; χ^2 (1,50) = 23.73, $p < 0.01$).

YouTube Use and Belief in the Paranormal

Building on these findings, the study analyzed data from a survey of the U.S. public to test how different forms of media use, including YouTube use, predicted belief in hauntings.

Methods

The survey was conducted online from August 23 to September 2, 2021, during the period encompassed by the content analysis. The sample (n = 1,035) was obtained from Qualtrics using national population quotas (see Supplementary Data S1 for details). The survey included measures of belief in hauntings, media use (overall television viewing; science fiction viewing; paranormal documentary and reality program viewing; and use of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter), background factors that can predict paranormal beliefs (political ideology and religiosity), and demographics (self-identified sex; self-identification as Black, Hispanic, and Asian American; age; education; and income).[16,17] Table 3 reports the coding, mean, and standard deviation for all variables in the analysis.

Results

An ordinary least squares regression analysis tested whether the media use variables and background factors predicted belief in hauntings. The results (see Table 4) indicated that neither overall television viewing nor science fiction viewing was significantly related to such belief. By contrast, paranormal documentary and reality television viewing, paranormal news following, and YouTube use predicted greater belief in hauntings. Unexpectedly, Facebook use was also positively related to such belief. Neither Instagram use nor Twitter use significantly predicted belief in hauntings. Religiosity was positively related to belief in hauntings, and women were more likely than men to believe in hauntings. Meanwhile, age and education were negatively related to belief in hauntings.

Discussion

This study's content analysis revealed that paranormal claims were overwhelmingly common in videos about hauntings and UFOs and that a majority of videos about each topic featured purported footage of paranormal phenomena. Scientific sources were uncommon, particularly in haunting videos,

Table 2. Examples and Intercoder Reliability Coefficients for Variables in the Content Analysis

	Ghost examples (channel name)	*UFO examples (channel name)*	*Gwet's AC*	*Percentage agreement*
Paranormal claim	A host saying she believes a ghost known as La Carreta de la Muerta "to be true" (Daicy Maria) An interviewee recounting a "life-threatening" encounter with a poltergeist (Warner Bros. Entertainment)	An interviewee describing accounts of a UFO "land[ing] in broad daylight in Ruwa, Zimbabwe" (PowerfulJRE) A narrator stating that "accounts of UFOs have been documented on the Solomon Islands for years" (History)	0.78	83%
Purported footage	"Eerie footage" of "what appears to be a hand" (Slapped Ham) Security camera footage of a woman "who seems to slowly disappear" (Mr. Nightmare)	Video where a "navy crew struggles to lock onto a fast-moving object" (60 Minutes) A recording made by a woman who reported witnessing "flying objects" (CNN)	0.74	87%
Scientific source	Inventor Thomas Edison (Slapped Ham)	Former NASA scientist Dick Haines (Seattle Channel) Astrophysicist Jamie Matthews (Discovery UK)	0.67	79%
Government source	A Honolulu police officer (KHON2 News) A report from police in Madrid, Spain (MrBallen)	U.S. Navy personnel (TODAY) U.S. Department of Defense (Sky News)	0.78	87%
N			50	50

Note. Gwet's AC is a chance-corrected measure of agreement between coders.
UFOs, unidentified flying objects.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Coding for Variables in the Survey Analysis (2021)

Variable	*Mean (SD)/frequency*
Belief in hauntings (4-item index; alpha = 0.90). • "Places can be haunted by spirits" • "Ghosts exist" • "Some people can communicate mentally with those who have died" • "Some people can channel a spirit-being and allow it to temporarily assume control of their body"(0 = strongly disbelieve; 3 = strongly believe)	1.74 (0.83)
Overall television viewing (0 = zero hours a day; 4 = 4 or more hours a day)	2.93 (1.11)
Science fiction viewing (0 = less than a few times a month; 3 = nearly every day)	1.10 (1.03)
Paranormal documentary/reality viewing (2 item index; $r = 0.71$) (0 = less than a few times a month; 3 = nearly every day)	0.98 (0.96)
Paranormal news following (0 = not at all closely; 3 = very closely)	1.45 (1.09)
YouTube use (0 = less than a few times a month; 3 = nearly every day)	2.12 (1.06)
Facebook use (0 = less than a few times a month; 3 = nearly every day)	2.23 (1.15)
Twitter use (0 = less than a few times a month; 3 = nearly every day)	0.95 (1.20)
Instagram use (0 = less than a few times a month; 3 = nearly every day)	1.39 (1.32)
Political ideology (0 = very liberal; 6 = very conservative)	3.24 (1.69)
Religiosity (0 = religion not at all important; 3 = religion very important)	1.80 (1.16)
Self-identifies as a woman (0 = no; 1 = yes)	54%
Self-identifies as Black (0 = no; 1 = yes)	13%
Self-identifies as Hispanic (0 = no; 1 = yes)	18%
Self-identifies as Asian American (0 = no; 1 = yes)	6%
Age (in years)	46.73 (18.09)
Education (0 = less than a high school degree; 5 = postgraduate degree)	2.42 (1.49)
Income (0 = less than $10K a year; 11 = 150K or more a year)	5.25 (3.38)

while government sources were common in UFO videos, but not haunting videos—perhaps reflecting recent public reports on UFOs by U.S. government agencies such as the Pentagon and NASA. These findings raise the prospect that YouTube users who seek out or incidentally encounter videos about hauntings and UFOs will tend to find messages featuring paranormal claims and purported footage of paranormal phenomena. By contrast, users may be less likely to see scientific sources discussing paranormal claims.

Table 4. Predicting Belief in Hauntings (2021)

Variable	*Coefficient (SE)*
Overall television viewing	0.03 (0.02)
Science fiction viewing	–0.01 (0.02)
Paranormal documentary/reality viewing	0.21** (0.03)
Paranormal news following	0.14** (0.02)
YouTube use	0.06* (0.02)
Facebook use	0.05* (0.02)
Twitter use	–0.01 (0.02)
Instagram use	–0.01 (0.02)
Political ideology	0.02 (0.01)
Religiosity	0.09** (0.02)
Self-identifies as a woman	0.22** (0.05)
Self-identifies as Black	0.08 (0.07)
Self-identifies as Hispanic	0.10 (0.07)
Self-identifies as Asian American	–0.16 (0.10)
Age	–0.006** (0.002)
Education	–0.05** (0.02)
Income	0.001 (0.008)
Constant	1.09** (0.14)
Adjusted R^2	.34
N	982

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.05$;
**$p < 0.01$.

The survey analysis, in turn, revealed that YouTube use was positively related to belief in hauntings—a result that extends previous research showing that YouTube use predicts belief in UFOs. The survey results also echo previous findings that paranormal documentary/reality television viewing and paranormal news consumption predict belief in the paranormal, whereas overall television viewing and science fiction viewing play less role in doing so. In addition, the finding of an association between Facebook use and belief in hauntings suggests that other social media warrant investigation as platforms for paranormal content.

Taken together, the results highlight how YouTube's dominant portrayals of paranormal phenomena could reinforce paranormal beliefs, consistent with theories of genre-specific cultivation. Thus, these results extend research on how paranormal-themed documentary television and news can cultivate paranormal beliefs.[18–28] In terms of mechanisms underlying such relationships, the results illuminate the potential role of exposure to paranormal claims and the potential naturalizing effect of exposure to perceptually realistic footage.[20,23,28,34,35]

At the same time, the results suggest that YouTube consumption can predict paranormal beliefs even in the absence of scientific or government sources: A relationship between YouTube use and belief in hauntings emerged even though few haunting videos included such sources. Given that half of all haunting videos (and two-thirds of UFO videos) came from channels affiliated with traditional media, one possibility is that *media credibility* plays a role in fostering such relationships. Additionally, the finding that overall YouTube use predicted belief in haunting, whereas overall television viewing did not could reflect differing media affordances:

While television features one-way transmission of content produced by media companies, YouTube is a social media platform co-constructed by users.

It is important to note that the cross-sectional analysis presented in this study does not establish that YouTube influences paranormal beliefs. Such a relationship could also reflect YouTube use motivated by prior belief in the paranormal or a feedback loop between the former and the latter. However, the content analysis results do suggest that YouTube users engaging in selective exposure to paranormal content will tend to find messages that reinforce preexisting paranormal beliefs.

Future research could build on this study by examining other message features (for example, nonscientific sources invoking the "trappings of science"); other paranormal domains, such as cryptozoology and astrology; other media platforms, ranging from television to TikTok; and other publics where paranormal beliefs are common.[23] Researchers could also conduct experiments testing the effects of YouTube videos on paranormal beliefs and explore potential mechanisms for such effects, including the roles of claims, source credibility, and perceptual realism.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary Data S1

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